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The development of an Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE) for use with event management students

Julia Tum

Background and aim of the research

Summative assignments provide an opportunity for universities to create a medium for appropriate assessment criteria for quality assurance and grading (Moon, 2002). But, as Moon and many others including Gibbs (1999); Scouller (1998); Biggs (2003) point out there are many other purposes and reasons for assessment. Brown and Knight (1994) believe that “assessment is at the heart of the student experience” and is probably the single biggest influence on how students approach their learning (Ramsden 1992; Gibbs, 1992; Brown & Race, 1997). Biggs (1999) believes that everything in the curriculum – the learning outcomes, the learning and teaching methods and the assessments – should follow on one from another and be seamlessly and clearly interrelated.

One assessment vehicle which appears to ‘tick’ all of the above criteria and which has been widely used in medical and veterinary studies is called Objective Structured Clinical Examinations (OSCE). This format has been extensively reviewed and analysed for its appropriateness for clinical studies. It is considered to be a reliable format which can be applied to large groups of students (Harden and Gleeson, 1979; Newble and Swanson, 1998). The simplicity of OSCE is that it is a checklist-based marking assessment and Newble (2004) believes this enhances consistency between multiple assessors. It uses multiple scenarios and assessment points which the assessors call “stations”. Within a 2-3 hour period many separate stations, lasting up to five minutes each, can be used and this increases the number and range of competences that can be tested.

It was considered by the UK Centre for Events Management in 2005 that the OSCE format could be transferred to the assessment of event management students and that 20-minute scenarios, not five minutes, could be devised to replicate everyday situations which new graduates would find in the events industry. The assessment follows the OSCE format but is called “Practically Assessed Structured Scenarios” (PASS). This name for the assessment style and format was adopted by the UK Centre for Events Management since it is composed of short scenario-based objective questions and it gives a very positive twist to the assessment method. The format has the advantage of being able to assess small aspects of their studies using short scenarios which would not normally be found in typical course work assessments or exams. It was necessary that the event management scenarios were educationally sound and that they should have some positive influences (Gijbels, van de Watering and Dochy, 2005).

Event management students, like medical students, should be prepared for the work that they will be doing when they leave university. Lecturers and assessors have a responsibility to ensure that students are following programmes of study which are relevant and meaningful to their future employers. Research for the Institute of Management (Coulson and Coe, 1991, cited in Bowdin, 2001) identified the qualities that future managers should possess. Mullins (1999) believes that many attributes are interconnected and that possessing one quality leads on to the acquisition and development of other qualities. These include basic knowledge and information, problem-solving and decision-making skills, creativity and mental agility.

Level 2 comprises both BA and HND students. This latter group complete their studies at the end of level 2 and so it is critical that the work that is completed within this year not only prepares the BA (Hons) degree students to enter level 3 studies, but also prepares the HND students for a career in event management and that it gives a true reflection of their abilities to enter the event industry. The PASS assessment is part of that overall assessment and in contributing to the final award of an HND it must be rigorous and relevant to that overall award. For example in the Event Production module at level 2 it was important to find a practical method of assessment which tested the students alongside their acquisition of knowledge. One of the module leaders, Simon Bell, feels that this approach enables a testing of the students' judgement in a real life situation where generally there are no right or wrong answers. The modules within the PASS are being assessed summatively and it is important to test the students' ability to analyse and apply the knowledge learnt from their studies to live or realistic situations.

How PASS was set up

Over a number of months all the event management tutors met to discuss the assessed scenarios that could take place. As these were being thought through and developed mock trials took place with students or staff to determine the time that would be needed to complete the exercises. It was thought by the events team that more in-depth assessment could take place in 20 minutes than in five minutes and that each scenario should be held in a different room. The lead assessor for each station was responsible for drafting the scenario and marking schedule. This ensured full understanding of the procedures and the requirements of the marking scheme. Boursicot and Roberts (2005) said that it is imperative that for the station there are clear guidelines and instructions both for the candidate and for the examiner of each station. This ensures parity and consistency.

In 2005 120 students undertook the first assessment in the style of PASS. It incorporated the assessment for two modules including the topics of operations management, information technology, health and safety, event law and event production. In 2006 and 2007 human resource management was also included in the PASS assessment.

In each year approximately 120 students were assessed on 'PASS day'. Sixty students were assessed in the morning and 60 in the afternoon. In order to prevent any collusion between groups of students, the afternoon groups started their exercises before the morning students had finished a 1 hour multiple choice examination. This multiple choice examination was part of the assessment package for one of the modules. The 60 students in both the morning and the afternoon were divided into ten groups of six students. A minimum of five assessment scenarios were created in five different rooms and these were replicated in a further five rooms. Ten minutes between each 20-minute assessment were built into the schedule to allow the students time to move from one room to the next. This enabled two identical streams of 30 students, divided into five groups of six students, to move through the five different rooms, or their replica, in 2.5 hours. The groups of students were kept apart during their movement from room to room by having a steward assigned to each group and a clear route to follow from room to room. In addition the rooms used were in a high rise building and the rooms used for each stream were two floors apart.

In order to make the replica rooms identical to each other a full list of all equipment/ information needed for each room was created and this served as a check list on the day. The main assessor was responsible for creating this list and ensuring that all was available. It was also imperative that the layout of the rooms was identical. In order for this to happen, without any errors, drawings of rooms, layout and furniture needed etc were submitted to the Facilities Department in advance and the room layouts agreed and set out the previous day.

It was necessary to create a Code of Practice and guidelines that the students and stewards had in advance. This ensured that they were in full knowledge of what would happen on the day to minimise any undue fears and unhelpful stress. It was essential that registration and entry to the PASS rooms was orderly and in line with good examination registration practice. They were registered as being present in an assigned room and their student cards checked for identification. All their personal belongings were stored in a secure room. They were only allowed to have certain items with them which included a calculator, ruler, pen and pencils. They were given clear plastic bags on registration for this purpose.

A great deal of statistical analysis and analysis of data from focus groups of staff, students and stewards has been undertaken on the application of the PASS vehicle. The overwhelming opinion is that the students find the assessment 'exciting', 'relevant', 'stressful' and 'fair'. The staff find the workload on the day manageable and are delighted that within 24 hours all the marks are assessed, moderated for accuracy and reliability and finally recorded for each student. There has to be investment of time and money prior to the day but this can be compared favourably to the total costs and frustrations of other forms of assessment.

In summary it has been demonstrated that the assessment can differentiate between different abilities of students and is now being considered for level 3 summative assessments in strategic management and in other modules across the Faculty. Although the initial investment in time is high, on the actual day both staff and students reap the rewards. Julia Tum and all of her colleagues in the UK Centre for Events Management are happy to discuss possible future applications with interested staff.

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